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ABSTRACT

Involvement in teaching improvement will provide new professional impetus and pride for many discouraged faculty members suffering from lessening enthusiasm for teaching, boredom with the same teaching schedule, and preoccupation with future job expectations. The reading and learning assistance staffs of colleges should be involved in this faculty development because faculty will respond better to colleagues who solicit their participation in educational experimentation than to administrators attempting the same thing. Reading and learning assistance personnel also have backgrounds in learning theory that they can pass on to academic colleagues: and they usually work with students upon whom program improvements can be basedthe students most likely to benefit from improved and revitalized teaching practices. Two examples of this type of teaching improvement occurred at Metropolitan State College (Denver, Colorado), where reading and learning specialists involved teachers from other disciplines in a program that redirected coursework toward developing student cognitive skills, and in using the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) for selected courses that had poor retention and success rates. The significantly greater student achievement resulting from these teaching improvements was personally rewarding to the faculty that participated. (RL)

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The Academic Seven Year Itch and a Possible Home Remedy

Catherine M. Warrick

Watchers of the higher education scene, college administrators faced with a no-growth environment in institutions of higher education, faculty organizations and unions at the bargaining table, and legislative committees in state house and senate chambers are becoming aware of a new kind of problem in higher education. Perhaps in small measure it has always been there, but recently it has begun to reach epidemic proportions. We call it the academic seven year itch because it is a phenomenon which frequently displays its first symptoms about the time when certain faculty achieve tenure, and in many institutions this corresponds to one's seventh year of professional service. The symptoms are a preoccupation with what one expects to be doing in five years; doubts about how many more consecutive times one can face another class of freshman composition, western civilization, or introduction to chemistry; a lessening of enthusiasm for teaching in general; and a movement toward methods of class evaluation which lend themselves to machine scoring. Indeed, this phenomenon has been observed by mid-career counseling and change specialists such as Haldene Associates, by professional organizations such as the Professional

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Organizational Development Network in higher education, and by many foundations and governmental agencies which have been funding faculty development activities around the country--Lilly, Carnegie, Kellogg, The office of Education.

Is the problem really more acute than before, or have we just gotten around to noticing it? My thesis is that it is genuinely more acute, and I believe I can tell you why. When I entered college teaching in the fall of 1958, I joined a small department offering a major, as well as many service courses, and I rarely had time to think much about my future. In five years I prepared fourteen different courses. On the semester system that was more than one new course each term. As higher education began to grow, I was pushed into light administrative responsibilities. Because I did reasonably well in administration, I soon found myself looking at an entirely new set of professional opportunities. It was also possible to make occasional contributions to journals, meetings, newsletters, etc.; indeed, such contributions were actively solicited.

As I observe young faculty entering the profession now, I cannot assure them that their opportunities will be anything like as rich as mine have been. With many collegiate departments already tenured in and limits being placed in some quarters on the percentage of faculty who may become tenured at an institution, job security is far from a sure thing. If one is fortunate enough to achieve tenure, what are the prospects?

With the rapid growth of higher education in the 60's, most academic departments, particularly at regional state-funded institutions, increased substantially in size. People were hired to teach their specialties, which means the range of courses they handled from year to year was relatively

small. When a new specialty was needed, a new person was hired to teach and/or develop the area. Professional expansion increasingly did not occur through new course or program development.

With these sorts of opportunities decreased, professional renewal was sought through other means: moving to a new school, publishing in one's field, or seeking administrative opportunity. In the 1960's these were viable alternatives. The rapid growth in enrollments meant that new institutions were being built and others were expanding; job opportunity was wonderful--it was a seller's market--and additional administrators were needed by the dozen.

In 1979 do these conditions still apply? Unfortunately not. Job mobility is becoming almost impossible except for a few highly sought after individuals. Our institution recently had faculty openings in both the English and History Departments, and for each of those positions over 300 persons applied. It has gotten to the point that one hates to advertise an opening because of the arduous, sometimes overwhelming, task of evaluating the applications. For administrative posts the situation is if anything worse. A recent administrative opening in the Denver vicinity attracted over 600 applicants; a post in Montana, hardly a place that flocks of people have sought out, recently drew over 400 applicants. Increasingly the jobs that are available ask for administrative experience. To help promising young professionals acquire some experience, institutions are beginning to look at junior administrative posts as rotating traineeships or internships and professional organizations are handling junior staff positions in a comparable manner.

What about the stimulation of scholarly activity? It is still possible

for any one person who wishes to do so to pursue scholarship in her/his special area, but getting published is quite another matter. Only 10% of our academic professionals account for over 90% of the scholarly research that is published in this country, and those persons are disproportionately located at large research universities that have low teaching loads. Such people are hard to compete with! The research associate in our Center for Experimental Studies and myself recently had an article accepted in a refereed journal that focuses on innovation in higher education. We were pleased to be accepted for publication but dismayed to learn that the publication date would be the summer of 1980, two years after the article was originally submitted.

So far I have attempted to describe the malady and have tried to make the case for it being a real rather than an imagined problem. Almost all academic administrators with whom I converse are greatly distressed by the problem and are seeking solutions to faculty renewal. The titles of the programs vary--faculty development, organizational development, teaching effectiveness, instructional development, retooling--but the problem which efforts are designed to address is basically the same--the faculty "blahs."

My title suggests that I believe remedies are available and homegrown ones at that. My optimism is based on several assumptions which I have come to accept after thirteen years of administering experimental programs in higher education. First, I believe that all people enjoy being successful. It is an odd individual who enjoys failure or who is happy with having completed an assignment or discharged a responsibility in a half-hearted or barely adequate manner. It is particularly true of professional people that they need to feel pride in their work. Teaching faculty are no exception.

Secondly, my experience suggests that teaching faculty on the whole really want to be good teachers. It gives them pleasure to see students succeed, flower, mature, respond to their tutelage. Conversely, they are discouraged when only a minority of students in their classes seems to grasp fully the courses, ideas, ways of approaching problems that they are trying to convey. To be sure, not all faculty enjoy working with all kinds of students, but increasingly most are aware that they will probably not be allowed the luxury of teaching only a selected group of students with whom they will feel or be able to develop a true intellectual comraderie in the course of a term.

Further, I am convinced that a significant majority of college faculty know very little about teaching and learning. Most teach as they were taught, preferring the pattern followed by their favorite, major, graduate professors. The graduate seminar where each teaches all is the ideal for which they long and strive. This observation is not meant to be deprecating nor a basis for indictment. It is a simple fact, and it should not be surprising since the study of how people learn is restricted largely to a few students in Graduate Schools of Education. Many faculty do not regard this as important information at all; it is the student's responsibility to learn. And yet, there is disappointment when the student does not learn with the assumption being that there must be something wrong with the student or what the student did.

If faculty enjoy success as do most other people, if most faculty enjoy being successful in their teaching, but if most know little about how learning actually occurs, it follows that faculty renewal might be obtained in part through a renaissance in teaching or a revolution in teaching excellence. At Metropolitan State College this is indeed what is occurring, and two

examples should suffice to make the point.

Our College is a four-year, open admissions, urban, commuter institution. Through research and testing we learned that the majority of students in our freshman courses had not developed in their cognitive skills sufficiently to be classified (using Jean Piaget's classification system and criteria) as formal thinkers. In spite of Piaget's early belief that this level of cognitive functioning is usually developed around age 16, other American institutions of higher education have made a similar discovery about groups of their students--Rutgers University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Oklahoma, Xavier University in New Orleans, and Illinois Central College, to name a few. Unfortunately, most college courses begin from an assumption that the students in these courses have already mastered certain cognitive skills, and they begin there. At MSC we were able to tempt faculty from ten departments to consider teaching one section of their freshman courses quite a different way--a way that consciously strove to develop the cognitive skills which the students had not yet acquired. We called the program the STAR Program and the current participating departments are chemistry, economics, English, earth science, history, mathematics, philosophy, physics, psychology, and reading. The success of the experiment was outstanding, and it has been presented at a number of conferences and in several journals. The important thing for this discussion is that the participating faculty have found a new and exciting focus for professional activity. Half have been published as a result of their work, half a dozen have been recently promoted; their enthusiasm and success have brought another dozen faculty into the experiment.

A similar outcome has been experienced by a number of faculty who began working on a PSI (Personalized System of Instruction) version of introductory

courses that had terrible retention and success rates. In beginning geology a 40% retention and success rate rose to 80% with no loss in learning. In beginning logic the rate is up to 82% with an increase in learning and average grade. In beginning reading courses, the McGraw-Hill tests used for pre and post test measures showed significantly greater achievement. For participating faculty this has been profoundly rewarding.

We can prove that involvement in teaching improvement will provide new professional impetus and pride for many discouraged faculty. A legitimate question is, however, why am I telling you? Because at Metropolitan State College it is reading and learning assistance staff that have been our principal colleagues in achieving these results. There are several reasons why this should have been so.

Faculty respond better to colleagues who solicit their participation in educational experimentation than they do to administrators who attempt the same thing. Given issues of academic freedom, you simply have a better chance of involving your faculty colleagues than deans and vice presidents have.

Most of you have a background about how learning occurs that your colleagues lack. You are in a position to provide leadership on issues of teaching and learning that is badly needed. It is very important how this leadership is expressed, but that is another paper.

You have access to students with needs who can be used as the entry point for working with individuals; that is, your common students can be the common focus, cause, reason for collegial activity.

I have tried to indicate to you three positive reasons why I believe you should seriously consider trying to engage your faculty colleagues in instructional development activities. In all fairness, I must also admit that there are some powerful negative reasons as well. Leading the list is the fact that I do not believe that learning assistance programs can expect either an internal or external increase in funding and staff resources. I am doubtful that our Skills Reinforcement Center can expect to grow and I doubt that your programs will grow either. Word has it that funding for the federal Trio programs will be cut this year. On my North Central Association accreditation visits I have not visited a single campus in three years that is growing. If learning support programs are going to be able to continue to do their job and, in fact, increase the number of needy students they reach, a new strategy will be needed. My purpose is to suggest to you a powerful new strategy--extend your influence and the help students can receive by getting the faculty to work with you and share your burdens. For every faculty person whom you can involve in more effective instructional practices, your personal impact on students will be exactly doubled. If I have been unable to persuade you previously to join this faculty development movement, I hope this latter consideration will be compelling enough to start you thinking.

Join efforts with us--the Center for Experimental Studies, the Skills Reinforcement Center, and the Reading Department of Metropolitan State College. You will benefit through increased influence, outreach, and

stature in the academic community; your faculty colleagues will benefit by catching a new professional vision and opportunity; your institutions will benefit through improved retention rates and reputation for quality education. Most of all, your students will benefit from increased instructional effectiveness.

You have some special advantages working for you in adopting this additional mission opportunity, and the time is right. Don't let this unique moment in the history of higher education pass you by.